BUDDHIST MONASTIC LIFE

according to the texts of
the Theravāda tradition

MOHAN WIJAYARATNA

Translated by Claude Grangier
and Steven Collins

with an Introduction by
Steven Collins

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Contents

Introduction

Buddhist Monasticism

The monastic tradition of Buddhism is probably the oldest in the world, and has certainly been the most widespread, both geographically and culturally. The traditional dates for the Buddha given in Western scholarship are c.566–486 B.C.[1]: the order he founded has existed for two and a half thousand years. Although by the medieval period the Buddhist monastic order had all but disappeared from India, by that time it had been established in almost every other part of Asia. During the centuries following the Buddha's death various different "schools" of Buddhism arose; this book describes the ideal monastic life envisaged by one of them, the Theravāda or "Way of the Elders."[2] These ideals are preserved in the Pali canonical texts and commentaries and have been followed in India from the ancient to early medieval periods (a small modern presence remains in Bengal, and, by recent reintroduction, in Nepal); in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) from the third century B.C.; and in mainland Southeast Asia (what are now Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia) from medieval times until the present day. Alas, the twentieth century has not been kind to Buddhism: modern governments in mainland China, Tibet, Vietnam, North Korea, Laos and Cambodia have attempted either to destroy the religion altogether or at least put very severe restrictions on the institutional possibilities for practicing it.

As Dr. Wijayaratna explains in Chapter 1, the Buddha and

his disciples are said to have been one of a number of groups of religious mendicants in ancient India; Buddhist texts call such a group a *gaṇa*, and each had its *gaṇācariya*, "group teacher" or "leader." It might have been the Buddha's slightly older contemporary Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism, who was the first to convert such a group into a monastic Community (*saṅgha*) by means of a codified Monastic Rule; but Jain tradition holds that its earliest texts have been lost, and we cannot recover the precise chronology and nature of the earliest Jain monasticism. Buddhist texts say that the Buddha first established the Community of monks; later, apparently with reluctance and after the intercession of his faithful companion Ānanda, he granted the wish of his aunt and foster-mother Mahāpajāpatī and established the Community of nuns. We know from inscriptions and texts that the order of nuns existed in India and elsewhere in South Asia until the medieval period, but it seems to have died out then.[3] In Buddhist monastic law, the ordination of any new nuns requires the presence of a number of other properly ordained monks and nuns. In different Theravāda countries at different times, the order of monks has sometimes declined so much that there have not been enough properly ordained monks to continue ordaining new members; but the ordination lineage has been reestablished with the help of monks from other countries. This did not happen with the order of nuns. Although subsequently there have been women following what Dr. Wijayaratna calls "the path of inner progress," their status in both monastic and civil law has been that of laypersons who practice an extended version of lay Buddhist ethics by following eight or ten Precepts rather than the usual five.[4] Thus while the Monastic Rule for nuns is extant in the texts, as are many stories about individual nuns, unless and until some way is found to reestablish the nun's Community in Theravāda countries, these texts are of historical interest only, and do not provide an actual code of behavior for women Buddhists today. For this reason, although in this book Dr. Wijayaratna often writes about the nuns and their rules, this aspect of the subject is not so thoroughly explored as are the ideals for monks.[5]

THERAVĀDA BUDDHIST LITERATURE[6]

The texts used by Dr. Wijayaratna are all in Pali, and fall into two groups, the Canon and the commentaries. The Canon is divided into three "baskets" (*piṭaka*): that of the Monastic Rule or Disciplinary Code (*Vinaya-piṭaka*), the Discourses or Sermons of the Buddha (*Sutta-piṭaka*), and the systematic psychological and philosophical texts of "Further Doctrine" (*Abhidhamma-piṭaka*). These texts were at first preserved orally; all Buddhist schools speak of a number of Councils or "Communal Recitations" (*saṅgīti*) said to have taken place in the first few centuries of Buddhist history; unfortunately, these accounts are for the most part mutually incompatible. The Theravāda version holds that the first two "baskets" were recited at the first council, held immediately after the Buddha's death, while the third was finally closed at a third council held under Emperor Aśoka in the third century B.C. It is also held that the tradition of commentarial works was begun at an early period (indeed the Canon itself contains material of the commentarial genre); the mission sent out by Aśoka to introduce Buddhism to Ceylon is said to have brought with it both Canon and commentaries. Both kinds of "text" were still preserved orally, until they were written down for the first time in the latter part of the first century B.C.; at some point, presumably before this, the commentaries were translated into the contemporary language of Ceylon (Sinhala). The commentarial works extant, however, date from a later period; those used in this book are attributed to two great Indian scholar-monks, Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla, in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. Both of these authors state, however, that they were basing their Pali commentaries very closely on earlier texts preserved by the monastic lineage in Ceylon named after its main monastery in Anurādhapura, the Mahāvihāra.

Dr. Wijayaratna draws most of his data from the *Vinaya-* and *Sutta-piṭakas*, with occasional use of the commentaries on them. The *Vinaya* has two main sections, called *Sutta-Vibhaṅga* and *Khandhaka*, along with a third and probably later appendix called *Parivāra*. The *Sutta-Vibhaṅga* contains the *Pā-*

timokkha, which is the basic list of rules for monks (227) and nuns (311), embedded in a text made up of stories — particularly of the circumstances that led to the Buddha's promulgation of each rule — and an old word-by-word commentary on each rule. The organisation of the rules is explained and discussed in Chapter 8; the *Pātimokkha* itself is recited in an important monastic ceremony which takes place on the days of the full and new moon, called *Uposatha* (see Chapter 7, pp. 123–24). The *Khandhaka* has two parts, the *Mahāvagga* and *Cullavagga*, which contain a variety of materials arranged thematically, including parts of the Buddha's biography, various rules and observances (such as "On Robe Material" and "On Medicines"), stories of monks in different areas, and accounts of the founding of the nuns' Order and of the first two Councils. The *Sutta-piṭaka* contains five collections of texts, each known as a *Nikāya*. The first four (*Dīgha, Majjhima, Saṃyutta,* and *Aṅguttara*) contain discourses arranged in accordance with their length and/or subject matter, most of which are attributed to the Buddha. The fifth (*Khuddaka*) is a miscellaneous collection of texts, some clearly early, others clearly late; of particular importance to Dr. Wijayaratna's account, especially in Chapter 1 on the members of the earliest Community, are the poems attributed to monks and nuns, the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, and the stories collected in Dhammapāla's commentary on them.

How Reliable are the Texts?

It seems to me useful to divide Theravāda Buddhist history into three periods; these chronological layers are not, obviously, to be taken as separate realities in actual history, but simply reflect the different kinds of evidence which are available to us.[7] The first or "early" period lasts from the time of the Buddha (whenever that was) to that of Aśoka. Some of Aśoka's inscriptions mention Greek kings, whom we can date with confidence, and so his reign, c.268–239 B.C., provides the first really secure historical data we have for Bud-

dhism, and indeed for any ancient Indian history. We have no evidence of any kind which can be dated before Aśoka; we must make inferences from his inscriptions, from the texts (whose extant form is due to the later period), and perhaps also from the material remains of later times. From the time of Aśoka onwards, in the second or "middle" period, in addition to an increasingly large amount of textual materials, we have inscriptions, paintings, sculptures and other material remains to supplement and on occasion correct what the texts tell us. Neither material remains nor texts – which include sources in indigenous languages other than Pali – are as extensive as those to which historiographers of the classical or medieval West apply their skills, but they still provide the basis for writing history in a straightforward sense (not that this is ever easy, of course). The third of "modern" period refers to those recent centuries in which we have first-hand reports from western travelers, officials of imperial governments, anthropologists and others, as well as the modern records kept by indigenous rulers and bureaucracies. The first work of this period is the still useful account by the English sailor Robert Knox of his enforced sojourn in Ceylon from 1659–79 (reprinted in Knox 1956–7). In very recent times the study of Theravāda Buddhism has been particularly rich in ethnographies and modern histories written by both western and indigenous observers.

How far is it possible to use the extant texts as evidence for the early period? Obviously, we cannot conclude that because something is *not* described in the texts, it could not have happened; but this kind of argument will never establish anything positively. The question is: what use can we make of what the texts do tell us? Let me start by quoting two leading contemporary scholars of Theravāda. Richard Gombrich, in a review of the French version of this book, wrote:

> It is a modest, straightforward account of what the Pali Canon tells us of how Buddhist monks and nuns were supposed to live. Oddly enough, no such account has been published before. Most authors who have written on the Sangha

> have concerned themselves largely with the Buddha's doctrine and monastic spirituality, giving pride of place to the inner life. Sukumar Dutt's admirable pioneering work was an attempt to write an early *history* of the Sangha, relating it to its antecedents and speculating on its development; scholars have tended to accept most of his conclusions without going back to the evidence . . . Dr. Wijayaratna is content to give us a synchronic picture . . . [He] refuses to discuss chronology or stratification, but takes the canonical account at face value (without, however, saying that he believes it). I find his approach fruitful. What he has shown is that the sources are predominantly consistent. Whether they go back to the Buddha is of course another matter; but when one has read this book it is no longer possible to maintain that the Pali *Vinaya* and *Sutta Piṭakas* are a hotchpotch of material drawn from several centuries.[8]

Heinz Bechert, in the bibliography to a brief overview article on the Buddhist monastic Community, writes: "unfortunately, the existing monographs on the early *Saṃgha* are of limited use only, because their authors, who have not understood the rules of Vinaya as a legal system, concentrate on historical aspects and often propose problematic theories." He also mentions Sukumar Dutt's work as an example of this.[9]

Neither of these two writers, nor I, wish to belittle Dutt's contribution to the subject: on the contrary, his books remain important and helpful, and deal with many more topics than can be discussed here. But it is useful to take his work as an example of a general principle: if scholarship is to advance, it is impossible to rely on such secondary sources as if they have established once and for all the truth about their subject. We must always go back to the primary sources. To exemplify the point, let me take one aspect of Dutt's most important and influential speculation, concerning the nature and evolution of the earliest Saṅgha. Dutt first proposed his account specifically as "a theory," indeed a "very bold" one, but over the years it has assumed the role of a received wisdom.[10] Although he acknowledges (1962, p. 57) that "in the *Vinaya*-

piṭaka the Bhikkhu-saṅgha appears not as a body of wanderers but as a settled cenobitical society," he argues that this was a development from an original stage where "settled life in a monastery is not contemplated at all, and the ideal life for a Bhikkhu is set out to be a free, unsocial, eremitical one" (1960, p. 112). In support of this he cites the well-known phrase used by the Buddha when sending out the first sixty monks to preach, "let not two of you go the same way" (Vin I 21). For Dutt, "the eremitical ideal indicated here . . . [is] a life of solitude and hardship" (1960, p. 112). It was, in his view, the Rainy Season Retreat, when monks stayed together in one place for the three or four months' duration of the monsoon season, which was the turning point "from wandering to settled life." But as Dr. Wijayaratna explains in Chapter 2, what the texts actually contain is more complex: while they do say that moving from place to place was an important part of the early Community's lifestyle, they also say that the Buddha accepted a park donated as a residence by King Bimbisāra of Magadha very soon after his Enlightenment and founding of the Order. This park was on the outskirts of the town of Rājagaha, and was specifically chosen as somewhere neither too far from nor too close to lay society. When members of the Community traveled, they usually went from one such park or monastery to another. Similarly, in the story of the first institution of the Rainy Season Retreat (see pp. 19ff. below), the text does not tell us that *all* monks and nuns were always traveling, continuing throughout the monsoon, but only that some monks in one place (Rājagaha) did so on one occasion, and were criticised for it. The injunction to travel alone forms part of an injunction to travel and spread the Teaching "for the good of the many. . . . out of compassion for the world" (cited on p. 19 and elsewhere in this book); in the context it obviously means that the original small band of monks, on their first journey, should split up to cover as much ground as possible, without wasting manpower. It says nothing about a general mode of life prescribed for all monks all of the time.[11] Thus Dr. Wijayaratna's conclusion seems to me impeccable, and describes what the texts actually contain rather than the

"history" which Dutt (and others) have presumed to read from them: although "some scholars think that the institution of the Rainy Season Retreat served as a bridge between two periods in the history of the Buddhist monkhood: wandering and sedentary life . . . we are not dealing here with a transformation, nor with two different stages; the institution of the Retreat served rather to connect two different styles of life" (p. 21 below).

Both before and after the adoption of the Rains Retreat by Buddhism (which was already the practice of other ascetic groups), members of the *saṅgha* lived both itinerant and sedentary lives. In the earliest "missionary" days, most monks are said to have traveled constantly to spread the Buddha's message; but they are also said to have stayed in one place for periods of time. Apart from those who were ill or old (see p. 30), the practical details of monastic organization required some members of the Order to remain in monasteries and other residences of the Community (see, for example, Chapters 2, 3 and 4 on the appointment of monks to oversee the assigning of lodgings, robes and food). In fact, to accept the myth of a transition "from eremitical to cenobitical life" is, as the Christian terminology shows, to impose on Buddhist monastic history categories derived from the received wisdom about the Christian tradition – which is itself equally legendary and unhistorical.[12] The word "eremitical," like "hermit," derives from a Greek term used to refer to the fact of living in places away from normal human habitation, notably the deserts and mountains of Egypt and other areas in what is now called the Middle East; "cenobitical" means having a "shared" or "common life," and is used to describe those who lived together under a Monastic Rule. Since some (but by no means all) of the Christian "dwellers in the wilderness" lived alone for some or all of the time, the eremitical life came to be contrasted in that tradition with the cenobitical. (The question of solitude in Buddhist monasticism is discussed in Chapter 7.) But this opposition is not that between traveling and remaining in one place; in fact most of the "Desert Fathers" in early Christian history, whether they

lived alone or with others, did not travel, apart from pilgrimages and going to visit others. When the earliest Buddhist monks are described as traveling to preach, apart from the first group of sixty they are frequently pictured as doing so in groups. So Dutt's "theory" coalesces three quite separate issues, about which the texts have many different things to say: living alone or living with others, traveling or staying in one place, and living far from or close to other human habitations.

What Dr. Wijayaratna does here, then, is to let the texts speak plainly and clearly for themselves. His judicious selection and presentation of the evidence shows that the ideal system of monasticism they present is, in general, a single and coherent one; we are not presented with a series of historical layers and an evolution from one thing to another. The question still remains, of course, whether the picture of the early Saṅgha presented in the texts is historically accurate; this raises much bigger and more difficult problems, which apply to the study of any religious tradition: that of the overall chronology and provenance of the canonical texts, and of the relationship between textual ideals and actual practice. These are subjects on which, naturally and rightly, opinions differ. In Buddhism, as elsewhere, it is possible to use archaeological and epigraphical data to balance the textual accounts,[13] and also to compare Buddhist textual sources with those of other traditions, notably Jainism.[4] In the case of what I called the "early," pre-Aśokan period, however, apart from what very little we can infer about Buddhist monastic life from Aśoka's inscriptions, the texts are all we have. For this period, therefore, I agree with what Richard Gombrich has said elsewhere, again referring to the French version of this book: "the *Vinaya* as it stands is of a piece, and if we refuse to believe its own account of the Sangha's development – as of course we can – we are left with no certain knowledge of the subject" (1988, p. 93). One might say, with perhaps some exaggeration, that if any parts of the *Vinaya-piṭaka* are accepted to be early, then, in the absence of external evidence, it might all be; and equally, if

any parts are adjudged to be late, then it might all be late. In this case as with almost all of the Pali Canon, I believe, attempts to demonstrate historical layers based solely on internal evidence produce not historical scholarship, but merely a certain kind of inept and *a priori* literary criticism.

In the Introduction to the French version of this book, Dr. Wijayaratna made clear his own attitude to the evidence provided by the textual tradition, and it is in this spirit that the book should be read:

> This work will not attempt a critical analysis of the opinions found in the *Sutta-piṭaka*, nor to discover the date at which one or another *Nikāya* was collected. With regard to the *Vinaya-piṭaka*, it is probable that even in the area of monastic discipline some rules were drawn up and arranged later, after the Buddha's death; nevertheless the Buddha is regarded as having established the rules of the Community. It is likely, in fact, that the principles and precepts of the Community were subject to elaboration during the first few centuries of its existence. We will take the following view; whenever we find that the origin of a particular rule is attributed to the Buddha, we may conclude *either* that at the time when the definitive version of the code of discipline was drawn up, this rule was thought to be a precept established by the Buddha himself, *or* that at that time the disciples felt the need to present or regard such a rule as coming from him. Whether or not one or another precept was in fact established by the Buddha, what is important from our point of view is the sense and interpretation it is given by Theravāda monasticism.
>
> In the following pages, the intention is simply to give an account of the discourses and rules which the Theravādins regard as the Doctrine (*Dhamma*) and the Discipline (*Vinaya*) of their tradition . . . On occasion we will make use of the Pali commentaries in order to come to a better understanding of some canonical passages. It is true that quite a stretch of time separates the Pali Canon from the commentaries on it: the canonical texts come from the third century B.C., whereas the Pali commentaries as we now have them belong to the fifth century A.D. Nonetheless, the Pali commentaries are valuable, for two reasons. The first is historical: the Pali com-

mentaries did not appear suddenly in the fifth century. They were based on the Old Commentaries and on the interpretations given by the Theravādin Elders and teachers, which had been handed down from generation to generation. The second is an issue of interpretation: Theravāda monastic tradition must be seen, in my opinion, not from the point of view of the Mahāyāna, of the Vajrayāna, or of Hinduism, but from that of the Theravāda itself. For that reason it is necessary to take into account both the opinions and attitudes specific to the Theravāda, and its tradition of interpretation.

Suggestions for Further Reading

THE VINAYA-PIṬAKA

References to the Pali text of the *Vinaya-piṭaka* in this work, as in that of almost all other scholars of Buddhism, are to the roman script version edited by H. Oldenberg, and published by the Pali Text Society, London (last reprinted 1964–82). Parts of it were translated by Oldenberg and T.W. Rhys Davids, in *Vinaya Texts*, Sacred Books of the East vols. 13, 17 and 20 (last reprinted by Motilal Banarsidass 1982–4). Miss I.B. Horner translated the whole text as *Book of the Discipline* Parts 1–6, Sacred Books of the Buddhists vols. X, XI, XII, XIV, XX, XXV (last reprinted by the Pali Text Society 1966–83). References are to the volume and page number of the Pali text: unfortunately, the text and translations of the *Vinaya* are not easy to collate, since Oldenberg edited the text in an order different from the traditional canonical one, whereas the translations follow the canonical order. The canonical divisions and order were described earlier; the following table is intended to help readers, particularly those without knowledge of Pali, to check references and study particular parts of the text further:

(O = Oldenberg's text; IBH = Horner's translation; O/RhD = Oldenberg and Rhys Davids' translation.)

The *Sutta-vibhaṅga* (i) Rules for monks (*bhikkhu-vibhaṅga*) = O

vols. III and IV pp. 1–207; IBH Parts 1, 2 and 3 pp. 1–155; O/RhD (the *Pātimokkha* rules only) Part 1 pp. 1–69.
The *Sutta-vibhaṅga* (ii) Rules for nuns (*bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga*) = O vol. IV pp. 211–351; IBH Part 3 pp. 156–426; not translated by O/RhD.
The *Mahāvagga* = O vol. I; IBH Part 4; O/RhD Parts 1 pp. 73–355, and 2 pp. 1–325.
The *Cullavagga* = O vol. II; IBH Part 5; O/RhD Part 2 pp. 329–439, and Part 3.
The *Parivāra* = O vol. V; IBH Part 6; not translated by O/RhD.

All of these works contain valuable introductions, notes and appendices.

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Notes to the Translation

In this translation we have tried to render in English as clearly as we could the content and style of *Le Moine Bouddhiste*. In consultation with Dr. Wijayaratna, we have changed the wording and order of some passages, incorporated most footnotes into the text, omitted some repetitions and most references to French secondary sources, provided references to English works instead of French where possible, corrected some typographical errors and references to Pali texts, and added the brief Appendix 3 on the Precepts; Dr. Wijayaratna has provided some new references and the new Appendix 1, with a fuller account of the Order of Nuns. Endnotes in square brackets are translation notes. Abbreviations used

follow the scheme of the *Critical Pali Dictionary* (published by the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters: see the Epilegomena to Vol. 1); texts referred to are the editions of the Pali Text Society, London. The word *pāli/pāḷi* is printed in Anglicized form, without diacritical marks.

I should like to thank Patrick Olivelle and Gregory Schopen for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this Introduction.

Steven Collins
Montréal, September 1989

Endnotes

1. There is another reckoning which would move these dates forward to 448–368 B.C.
2. For a discussion of these early schools see Lamotte (1988); and for a succinct explanation and definition of the Theravāda tradition as a monastic entity see Gombrich (1988) pp. 110–2.
3. See Falk (1980), Gunawardana (1979) pp. 37–39 and Law (1939–40).
4. These precepts are given in Appendix 3, and cf. Appendix 2, pp. 166–67, 170–71.
5. The bibliography given here includes some ethnographic materials on women's "monastic" practice in modern Buddhism.
6. See K.R. Norman (1983a) for a fuller account.
7. The first two of these are similar to those identified by Heinz Bechert (e.g. 1979) as "early" and "traditional"; but his criterion for division and designation is the relation of the monastic community to society, and my third, "modern" period does not correspond exactly to his third, "modernist" one. My choice of terms is not intended, as are Bechert's and also those used by Reynolds and Hallisey (87), to suggest anything about the character of Buddhism in different periods, but merely to delineate three historical layers in terms of the evidence we have for them.
8. Gombrich (1986) pp. 387–88, italics in original.
9. Bechert (1987) p. 40. The two authors I have cited here have